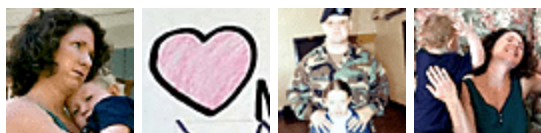


**SFGate**.com[www.sfgate.com](http://www.sfgate.com)[Return to regular view](#)

## Extension hits reservists' families Home beckons, but call of duty in Iraq remains

[John Koopman, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Saturday, September 13, 2003

[©2003 San Francisco Chronicle](#) | [Feedback](#)URL: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2003/09/13/MN308179.DTL>

Skyler Bischel, a 22-month-old burst of toddler energy, picks up a bulky black cassette recorder and with tiny fingers hits the "play" button.

A man's deep voice comes on: "One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish."

Skyler hits "stop." He points to the cassette and says, "Da-dee."

That, and the occasional phone call, is as close as father and son get these days. Skyler's father, a soldier in the California National Guard, is protecting Army convoys in Iraq.

And it's not going to get better anytime soon. The Defense Department announced this week that members of the Army Reserves and National Guard troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan will have their tours extended to a full year in-country, from the six months they had first expected.

News of the extension hit National Guard families hard. Long deployments mean less money coming in, sometimes resulting in debt. Children suffer from feelings of abandonment; marriages suffer and sometimes end.

Gail Thompkins-Bischel had expected her husband back in their Rodeo home Nov. 15. Now it will be six months beyond that.

"I think we, as a family, are holding up pretty well," she said. "But a lot of people are going through some real hard times with this. Money is tight, and not everyone has good family support."

### FROM THE ARMY TO THE GUARD

Her husband, Dave Bischel, served four years in the Army in the early '90s. At the beginning of this year, she said, he decided to join the National Guard for one year. He joined because he wanted to help his community. The Guard seemed like the perfect place to do it: Even if he got called up, he would probably end up guarding something on the West Coast, like the Golden Gate Bridge.

And he did get called up. First, it was to Fort Lewis in Washington. That's the normal way

of things: Regular active-duty military go to the hot spots, and the Guard and reserve fill in at stateside stations.

But Bischel is in a Military Police unit, which is exactly what the Army needs in Iraq. He's been there since May.

It's hot and dangerous work in Iraq. One member of the California National Guard, Staff Sgt. David Perry of Bakersfield, was killed Aug. 10 when a package he was inspecting exploded. Thompkins-Bischel said her husband has been under fire recently, too.

When Bischel first went overseas, his wife and 10-year-old daughter, Aria, made a chart through November. Half the days were crossed off, and their hope was half fulfilled. Then they got the word of the extension.

Now Thompkins-Bischel spends her days with Skyler, Aria, a couple of dogs and a cat. It's constant work and very little money. She had to quit her job to keep the family together and the household running.

## **BARELY MAKING IT**

Her husband's employer, Arrowhead Water, is making up the difference between his pay as an Army specialist and what he earns as an Arrowhead salesman. But that's only good for the first six months of deployment. When that expires, so will Arrowhead's payments for the family health insurance.

"We're making it, but only just," Thompkins-Bischel said.

Men and women who serve in the reserves and National Guard have regular lives and jobs, or they are students. Normally, they spend one weekend a month at a local Guard or reserve unit and two weeks every summer for training, and the income from the military is something extra.

But soldiers called to active duty receive standard military pay. Depending on rank, that's about \$1,700 to \$2,800 a month.

## **HUGE DISRUPTION**

Kim Gorski, whose husband is a staff sergeant in the California National Guard, said she often hears people say that U.S. troops and their families shouldn't complain, that they knew what they were getting into when they signed up.

But, she said, "You can't imagine how much this disrupts people's lives. You're just constantly on hold. Do you plan that family vacation or not? Do you sign up for school or do you wait?"

It's different for the regular Army types, she said. They have housing provided for them, whether they're deployed or not. And they have much more community support. Your neighbor's husband or wife is just as likely to be overseas as yours, and you can help each other out.

Members of the Guard and reserve live all over the place.

Gorski, who lives in Hayward, is the family readiness coordinator for the 870th Military Police Company, where her husband, Mike, is a supervisor.

As such, she communicates with family members and tries to help them with whatever needs they have. Deployments can mean broken marriages, money difficulties, kids with problems. The whole gamut.

Although some reservists and members of the Guard work for employers who make up the difference in pay while they are gone, employers are not obligated to do so. They are required only to hire the soldiers back after deployment at an equal position or higher, and with seniority.

Maj. Gen. Paul Monroe, head of the California National Guard, learned of the extension while on a tour of California units in Iraq and Afghanistan. He had to break it to his troops over there.

"They were extremely disappointed," he said in a phone interview from Afghanistan. "The only good thing was that it gave them a definite date for when they'll get out of here.

"I assured them that we will do everything we can to help them out, and to work with their employers and schools so they can make a successful transition when they get back," he said.

#### 4,000 TROOPS ACTIVATED

The California National Guard has about 1,500 troops in Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan. Out of the total force of 21,000, about 4,000 have been activated.

Bob Welch of San Ramon, whose son, Adam, is a National Guard soldier serving in Iraq, said he understands the need for troops in that ravaged country. But, he said, the lengthy tours put an "undue amount of pressure on Guard units."

Welch said there are kids being raised by grandparents, mothers with drug problems, people going deeply into debt. There are laws that lower mortgage interest rates for reservists and Guard members and prevent them from losing their homes because of deployment hardships. But he said it's not enough.

"Some of these families are really hit hard," Welch said.

Thompkins-Bischel said the extended deployment might cause problems for National Guard recruiting. She wonders who would want to join a unit that is likely to be sent to a combat zone, especially for such a long time.

Already, she said, morale is suffering. She said men in her husband's unit are talking about ways to get sent home early. She said there was talk about letting some of them take breaks from the action and fly home for a short time.

But the Pentagon is worried that many of them won't go back.

"I know Dave won't re-enlist," she said. "My daughter already told him, if he tries to stay in the Guard, she's going to shoot him in the leg."

Thompkins-Bischel said she saw a photograph taken in Iraq that summed up everyone's feelings. It was of a humvee, and someone had used chalk to write on the side: "One weekend a month, two weeks every summer -- my ass!"

*E-mail John Koopman at [jkoopman@sfgate.com](mailto:jkoopman@sfgate.com).*

[©2003 San Francisco Chronicle](#) | [Feedback](#)

Page A - 1